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THE LUCK ELEMENT¹

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THE prime necessity of human life on earth, as of all life, is adaptation to life-conditions. Human beings have found themselves confronted by various sets of these conditions, and have reacted upon them in a characteristic way; but whereas plants and animals have been forced to structural adjustments, on the basis of which they are classified into varieties, species and genera, men have performed mental and social adaptations, nearly as automatic at first as those of other organic beings, on the basis of which they are classified into grades of civilization. These life-conditions include those of the natural environment, such as climate, flora and fauna; those of the social environment of fellow-men; and those of the environment of ghosts and spirits. Adjustment to these several sets of conditions is through common modes of conduct, or folkways, out of which gradually crystallize the institutions of society.

A condition of a less material order which the most primitive of men were obliged to recognize as a part of life on earth, and to which they had to adapt themselves, was what we call chance or luck. Efforts and results are found not to be strictly in proportion, though experience shows a correlation between them upon which the race, in actual living, has had to depend. The same effort in hunting, put forth upon two separate occasions, has resulted now in plenty, easily obtained, and again in destitution and fatigue. Variation from the expected is always taking place, in all ages and stages. The liner strikes the derelict, drifting awash; the tire picks up a nail; the ivories kiss just as a hard shot and an excellent position are about to be attained; the baseball strikes an uneven spot and jumps over the fielder's head—and disappointed men groan over "bad luck" and "jinxes." The liner shaves the derelict; the nail is found to have little more than scratched the tire; a kiss results in making a shot and attaining a position uncontemplated; the safe hit is deflected into the fielder's hands—and then the favored men exult over "good luck" and "horse-shoes."

¹ This conception of the luck element in its relation to the evolution of religious beliefs and practises is based upon an analysis developed, mainly in lectures, by Professor Sumner. It has seemed to many of us both profound and suggestive, and we think it should be more widely known, and known as his. It is somewhat elaborated here; but the basic idea is not the writer's.

Luck plays a great part in any one's life. It may make or ruin. Upon the primitive stage it is the more significant because men live, so to speak, on the edge of existence, and it does not take much mischance to push them over. What wonder, therefore, that this element in life has occupied men's thoughts through the ages? They have loved it and feared it; and they have played with it as with no other interest. "Interest" is the word for their attitude toward it. The passion for getting something for nothing and the fear of getting nothing for something have always fascinated the human mind.

It would be entirely irregular if the presence of an element like this, among the life-conditions, had not evoked, in the course of social evolution, an important set of social adaptations. Reaction upon the physical environment has resulted in the industrial organization of society. Relations with the social environment have worked out into domestic and political institutions. The biological fact that *homo* is bisexual has led to a long series of adaptations that would not have appeared had *homo* been an unisexual organism. What human institutions correspond to the presence in the field of the element of chance or luck?

But, first, let us examine the element itself. Modern science, of course, recognizes no such thing as chance, in the sense of a result without a sufficient cause. It believes that nothing ever "just happened." The most "fortuitous" event can be explained if there is knowledge enough. The liner reached a certain point of latitude and longitude, at a certain instant, as the result of numerous contributing causes—steam-pressure, head-winds, gales, strikes, temperament of captain, and so on—the action of any one of which could have been predicted if knowledge had been sufficient. Similarly with the derelict. The collision was, therefore, in the natural order of things. There was no miracle or magic about it. The nail lay in such a position that it was bound to make a puncture or merely to scratch the tire. The billiard-balls were sure to kiss at the exact spot where they did kiss, being struck as they were. The inequality in the ground being such as it was, and the baseball coming as it did, the result could be indefinitely repeated if the conditions could be duplicated. It is all a question of knowing and foreseeing. To omniscience there could be no "luck"; to advancing knowledge there is less luck; and, as one set of phenomena after another is included within the range of rational explanation, the conviction has grown that law obtains throughout the universe, to the total exclusion of chance.

Luck, then, is a name for that which is inexplicable on our stage of knowledge, or in view of our unwillingness to take the trouble to get or apply that knowledge. It is what we are too ignorant or too unenterprising to figure out. Omitting the latter consideration as representing the entrance of the personal equation, the importance assigned to

luck varies inversely with the amount of knowledge. This means, however, since the knowable is immeasurably vast, that the luck element will always be an immense factor in human destiny.

Perhaps it is superfluous to point out that we currently recognize this relation of chance and knowledge. If a man "takes no chance" it means that he is informing himself to the utmost—indeed, he may even be fully informed and "betting on a sure thing." And after listening awhile to a person whining over his bad luck, are we not often exasperated into a partial personal investigation of his case, with the result that we find "not so much bad luck as bad management"? Again, when the small boy lays his finger upon the hot stove, we comfort him and say "Hard luck, old chap!" It was that, to him—he "didn't know any better." And, in our condolence, we put ourselves in his place. If a grown man should do the same thing and howl over his experience, the answer might be: "Serves you right! You knew better than to do that—or, anyhow, you ought to have known better."

Now the savage is like the child. His knowledge, beyond the restricted sphere of immediate experience, is small. The explicable, to him, is an exceedingly limited range; and the range of the inexplicable, the unreckonable, is correspondingly wide. Add to this the fact that ill luck, even a little of it, is a vastly more serious matter to him than to civilized man, and the significance to his destiny of the luck element—the "aleatory element" of Professor Sumner—is indefinitely enhanced. It forms for him, as the facts show, one of the major conditions of life on earth; and his adaptation to it, as he sees it, works out into an important set of social structures.

Nowadays civilized man has at hand an adaptation to the aleatory element which is the fine fruit of some of primitive man's primeval gropings toward safety in the face of mischance, viz., insurance. Insurance, in itself, does not lessen the losses involved, but it distributes them so they can more easily be borne. It reduces a variable of shattering loss to a constant of durable loss. It is always loss, be it noted—loss, submitted to in order to avoid utter calamity. In insurance-operations recourse is had to the laws of chance and actuaries figure out about what amount of mischance can be reckoned on. Then this is distributed in the form of premiums paid on policies. Insurance is a grand device, and its roots go farther back than one would think, offhand. Mankind on earth has always had an eye to the avoidance of ill luck, and in all ages has tried somehow to insure himself—to take out a "policy" of some sort. His methods of so doing were often rude and mistaken, but they were susceptible of replacement and rectification. Only by some such device was existence possible, in the presence of the menacing inexplicable.

But it may be objected that there is just as much good luck as ill luck, and the optimist will doubtless remark that all is for the best in this best of worlds. There is room for a difference of opinion here, no doubt; but the fact is that the tendency of human nature is to take good luck to be normal and as the matter of course, and to confine attention pretty largely to the ill fortune. Perfect health is not normal, yet we go on the theory that it is, and grumble at illness as a misfortune. Age brings on a series of discomforts; they are perfectly normal; but we still refuse to consider the good days as good fortune, and complain about the bad ones. That man was a great philosopher who kept a diary to which he looked back at times of discomfort, always finding some occasion when he was worse off. We do not take much pleasure in past joys when we are being plagued, but subscribe rather to the sentiment about sorrow's crown of sorrows being the remembrance of happier things.

But engrossment in the present is the rule among peoples whose representative faculties are relatively weak. Also, among the primitive folk, as has been intimated, ill luck is more important than good luck because, while the latter may be highly desirable, the former is supremely undesirable. It may mean present death; or a disablement, readily curable by us, but permanent and in the highest degree dangerous on a low stage of civilization; or some hideous disease. The experience of good luck never relieves people on that stage of the present fear of ill—indeed, a run of good fortune frightens them to the last degree, for it is a sure harbinger of calamity. Witness Polycrates. It is necessary to walk very softly when things go well, with an eye always cocked toward the perennial menace of ill. And if we recall the manifold dangers surrounding human life, before the barrier of civilization was built up to afford it some protection, we shall not be surprised at the prevalence of interest in avoiding ill as over against interest in attaining good. It is necessary to set ourselves in the situation of primitive man to realize this; but any one can help himself to do that if he will realize that the savage was really involved in a struggle for existence, whereas none of us are. We struggle for a standard of living; and if we lose out utterly, still existence is assured to us by the society in which we live. But our far-away ancestors, and their present-day representatives, the nature-peoples, lived and live in a direct relation to physical environment, one full of perils of a vital order. They were and are victims of a vivid fear of calamity; the “free and noble savage” was a philosopher’s phantasm.

With the aleatory element, especially in its negative phase of ill fortune, filling the perspective as an enduring and real menace—forming one of the major conditions of life—the primitive man at once sensed the discomfort that enforces adaptation. His attitude could

not be one of indifference, nor could his mind develop or harbor the more evolved conceptions that characterize a higher civilization. He could not conceive of the refined faith of the civilized man, any more than of the resignation of the stoic or the more enlightened resignation of the agnostic. Yet he must do something to avoid ill; and for that he must have some explanation of the inexplicable. It was not that he was at all the victim of intellectual curiosity. If this matter had not touched vitally upon his most vital interests, he would never have sensed the need of explanations. There had to be something accounting for the aleatory element, precisely in order to deal with it. He was not after any pure science at all, but the question was simply: What to do? How to insure against ill, that always threatened, but was not to be accounted for upon any basis of actual experience?

This was the issue that lay before the primitive folk in the face of this peculiar and inevitable life-condition. If anybody imagines that they attacked the issue and solved it by a conscious rational procedure, he has yet a great deal to learn about the early stages of society's evolution. Primitive people could not even have formulated the issue, let alone applying ratiocination to it. They felt it in a dull sort of way, and squirmed and fumbled about to dodge the pain or secure some alleviation. How, automatically and un-rationally, to get hold of some explanation of the inexplicable—that seems to be a problem indeed for childlike minds with but slight and unreliable equipment of matter and method.

In the primitive mental outfit, however, there existed a set of beliefs competent to account for all mysteries. Starting with a belief in the double or soul, practically all primitive people have developed the notion of the ghost and spirit, an evolution expounded by Spencer and others. And in this animism and daimonism there existed an entirely sufficient explanation of any and all the phenomena of the aleatory element. I do not need to go into the details of this matter. It is enough to say that the daimons were all-powerful, irresistible by unaided man, capable of inflicting "strange agonies" of all sorts, and, for the most part (corresponding to the aforesaid preoccupation with the negative side of the luck-element) they were maleficent. Whether ill-intentioned or not, their presence was productive of ill; the ghost of a dead mother, embracing her child, would cause its death or otherwise afflict it. There was, in short, no woe or calamity of man that could not be referred to the spirits. The spirit environment formed a complete and ready explanation for any and every phase of the aleatory element.

It is not asserted that the recognition, conscious or unconscious, of the element of chance summoned into being the idea of the spirit environment. That conception arose from other sources altogether.

But it was there, and it explained the otherwise inexplicable. The two conceptions dovetailed together, and out of this situation arose that important complex of social institutions of primitive times which we know as primitive religion.

The two conceptions still cling together. Inexplicable or unforeseeable calamities are still designated, generalizing, as "acts of God" or "acts of Providence." What men can understand and provide against they do not so designate. The range of the aleatory element has been much restricted by the growth of knowledge—we do not need the supernatural explanation of fossils, or thunder, or the plague any more, but explain by "lower" causes where they can be enlisted.

However the range of the aleatory element, as the inexplicable, is and always has been infinite; and so the inroads of knowledge and science amount in the end to subtracting something from infinity. The remainder is still infinity. But it satisfies the mind and clarifies the course of social evolution to note this one among the several cases of adaptation to life-conditions exhibited by the race. If there had been no luck element, there might have been a very different sort of animism, daimonism, and religion. As it actually has been, the former was a condition of life on earth to which men automatically adjusted themselves by recourse to the development of the religious institutions.